United Nations A/57/176

General Assembly

Distr.: General
2 July 2002

Original: English

Fifty-seventh session
Item 113 of the preliminary list*
Review of the efficiency of the administrative and financial functioning of the United Nations

Common services

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

Pursuant to General Assembly decision 55/469 of 12 April 2001, the Secretary-General has the honour to submit the present progress report on the activities of the Task Force on Common Services as a follow-up to the report of the Secretary-General of 9 October 2000 (A/55/461).

The Task Force on Common Services, which was established as part of the Secretary-General's reform measures in March 1997, continues to be convened by the Assistant Secretary-General for Central Support Services in his capacity as Executive Coordinator for Common Services, and its core members, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Office for Project Services. In addition, the World Food Programme (WFP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) participate as observers. The Executive Coordinator has been assisted by the Common Services Support Unit, which is jointly financed by the core members of the Task Force. The Task Force has continued to produce tangible results in four working groups: archives and records management; personnel services; procurement services; and travel and transport services. In addition, the working groups on facilities management and security and safety services have evolved into inter-agency networking forums: the Inter-Agency Facilities Manager Network and the United Nations Security and Safety Services Network, respectively. The Common Services Support Unit attached to the Executive Coordinator has been providing support to the United Nations Development Group for its common services pilot programme for country offices. The Unit also provides continuous support to

* A/57/50/Rev.1.

02-46753 (E) 130802

common services initiatives in other locations, including Bangkok, Geneva, Nairobi and Tokyo. The Task Force has now determined that the jointly financed Common Services Support Unit, which was originally scheduled to be phased out in August 2002, should continue its work for another year to carry out joint initiatives in archives and records management and in procurement services, as well as to backstop the networking forums.

The Task Force does not envisage further continuation of the project beyond August 2003. This will mark the completion of the Secretary-General's track II reform measures in common services. The Task Force will, however, continue to meet on a periodic basis to ensure that common services efforts are continuing and that inter-agency coordination is strengthened, including the expansion of networking arrangements in other areas, covering not only the New York-based organizations, but also the specialized agencies and international and regional financial institutions.

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I. Introduction

A. Background

1. The report of the Secretary-General of 14 July 1997, entitled "Renewing the United Nations: a programme for reform" (A/51/950), established the legislative mandate of the current common services initiative. The Office of Internal Oversight Services, in its review of common services (A/54/157), outlined possible constraints in the implementation of the Secretary-General's reform initiative, taking into consideration the different mandates and operational processes of the United Nations organizations, the culture of turf protection and the occasional lack of coordination and interaction at the senior levels of the organizations.

2. Initially, common service initiatives were focused on New York-based organizations directly under the authority of the Secretary-General. An Inter-Agency Task Force on Common Services was established as part of the Secretary-General's track II reform measures. The "Common Services Strategy Paper", issued in January 1998, continues to serve as an overall guideline for common services activities for the Organization. The status and progress of common services efforts were reported in the report of the Secretary-General of 9 October 2000 (A/55/461).

3. Pursuant to General Assembly decision 55/469, the present report has been prepared to inform Member States of further progress made and on the future direction of the Task Force on Common Services.

B. Task Force on Common Services

4. The Task Force on Common Services continues to be chaired by the Assistant Secretary-General for Central Support Services in his capacity as Executive Coordinator for Common Services. The core membership of the Task Force consists of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Office for Project Services. The World Food Programme (WFP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) participate as associate members. In addition, the Office of Legal Affairs and the Management Policy Office of the Department of Management attend as associate members.

5. As explained in the report of the Secretary-General of 9 October 2000 (A/55/461), the Task Force established a two-year cost-sharing arrangement for purposes of funding a Common Services Support Unit in the Executive Coordinator's office. The agreement called for the Secretariat to fund 40 per cent, and for the participating funds and programmes to share the remaining 60 per cent of costs. These arrangements have been extended for one year, through August 2003, to complete further joint initiatives in the areas of archives and records management, travel/transport services and procurement services.

C. Common Services working groups

6. As explained in the report of the Secretary-General (A/55/461, para. 15), the Task Force on Common Services originally established 11 technical working groups on: legal services; financial services (treasury); procurement services; printing services; facilities management; travel and transport services; archives and records management; security and safety services; personnel services; the Integrated Management Information System (IMIS); and information technology and telecommunications. Of these 11 groups, four remain operational: archives and records management; procurement services; personnel services; and travel and transport services.

7. The annex to the present report provides a summary table on the status of the technical working groups, as originally presented in the report of the Secretary-General. The table has been revised to reflect the achievements of individual working groups since their establishment and outlines their future activities.

1. Archives and records management

8. The programme for establishing harmonized policies and processes in the appraisal and classification of United Nations archive documentation was initiated in August 2001, with the goal of establishing a baseline database of all archivable records of the Secretariat and the four participating organizations. In addition, the programme aimed to define a common approach to identifying core records

and developing standard retention and destruction schedules.

9. In addition, the Task Force established a digital archives project, which is to be implemented in three phases. Phase 1, initiated in August 2001, is to review earlier United Nations studies and establish a statement of work. Phase 2, which should begin in August 2002, will focus on the development of a strategic plan. Phase 3 will focus on the implementation of the strategic plan, including hardware, software and staff training requirements.

2. Procurement services

10. The working group on procurement, now under the direction of the Secretariat, has established joint long-term contracts in the areas of office stationery supplies, photocopier leasing, bulk paper and telephone services and has negotiated a global freight forwarding contract. The group is currently developing new inter-agency requests for proposals for SITA, printing services, office furniture and basic information technology hardware and software requirements. Meanwhile, the United Nations has allowed other organizations of the common system and the specialized agencies to access its current long-term commercial agreement on anti-virus software. The World Bank, WFP, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, the United Nations International Computing Centre in Geneva, the United Nations Office for Project Services and the United Nations Compensation Commission benefit from this cost-saving common service arrangement.

11. The working group is also looking into the development of lead-agency procurement arrangements. A memorandum of understanding between the United Nations, UNICEF, UNFPA, WFP and UNHCR is being drafted to define a modus operandi and identify lead agencies for each commodity and service, including transport, medicinal supplies, emergency shelter and field communications.

12. In order to facilitate this arrangement, common contract review criteria and protocol arrangements will be developed to ensure that the participating organizations function within agreed oversight controls based on the revised financial regulations and rules for procurement. This specific initiative is under the leadership of the Secretariat.

13. The procurement working group has recently developed a pilot inter-agency procurement portal (http://unbiz.un.int), which is hosted by the Secretariat. The portal provides a single window for commercial suppliers to have access to the individual procurement web sites of participating organizations and agencies. The portal will be enhanced and facilitate future opportunities for e-commerce.

14. The procurement working group continues to maintain its linkage with the Inter-Agency Procurement Working Group on a number of issues, including the increased professionalism in procurement through staff training and certification.

3. Personnel services

15. The working group on personnel services is currently convened by the Secretariat. Since its establishment, the participating organizations have agreed to adopt harmonized policies on home leave travel, business class travel entitlements and the application of the daily subsistence allowance. The group is working to harmonize entitlements for field personnel at high-risk duty stations, under the leadership of UNICEF, and is currently looking into new human resource issues that relate to work/life matters, such as spouse employment, telecommuting, childcare and paternity leave.

4. Travel and transport services

16. The working group for travel and transport services, which is convened by UNICEF, has focused on completing a new travel contract for the five New York-based organizations. Some delay was encountered in the formal signing of the contract agreement as text clarifications were required on some legal clauses. The contract has been signed and quality service reviews between the working group and the travel services provider are to be held in September 2002.

17. More recently, the working group members have agreed to explore the possibility of having a commission audit to be applied to the travel services provider. The objective would be to review current revenue arrangements between the travel services provider and the airlines and to ensure that the United Nations is receiving the appropriate revenue percentage as stipulated in the contract. The focal point for this audit initiative is UNDP.

18. The working group intends to establish a corporate credit card arrangement to ease payment modalities with the travel contractor and look into a similar travel card arrangement based on a pilot exercise by UNDP. A system-wide household and personal effects shipment contract is to be completed in November 2002. The final contract arrangement will then be shared with the specialized agencies that have expressed interest in participating.

D. Inter-agency networking

19. In line with the recommendation of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions pertaining to the Overseas Property Management Information Exchange Network (see A/55/7/Add.1), a new inter-agency forum combining the mandates of both the discontinued working group for facilities management and the Information Exchange Network was established in March 2001 and renamed the Inter-Agency Network of Facilities Managers. This network, which is coordinated by the Secretariat, meets annually with the participation of United Nations funds and programmes, the specialized agencies and international and regional financial institutions. The network has addressed issues pertinent to the Capital Master Plan, the safety and security of Headquarters facilities and premises, results-based budgeting and long-term strategic planning.

20. The working group on security was discontinued by the Task Force in 1999 with a recommendation that a broader inter-agency networking arrangement be established to address issues specific to the safety and security of Headquarters facilities and premises. Accordingly, the Inter-Agency Security Networking Group was established in February 2001. The Group has developed and adopted generic policies on core competencies of security officers, specialized skills training and development.

21. In 2001, the High-Level Committee for Management created the Inter-Agency Security Management Network to develop inter-agency coordination on country-office staff security and protection in support of the Office of the United Nations Security Coordinator.

22. The Executive Coordinator confirmed that there was a continued need for the Inter-Agency Security Networking Group to address security and safety of the Headquarters facilities and premises, separate from the staff security and protection responsibility of the Office of the Security Coordinator. Subsequently, the Networking Group was renamed the United Nations Security and Safety Services Network. The Network has a core membership composed of the Secretariat, the regional commissions and the United Nations tribunals and treaty offices. The funds and programmes, the specialized agencies, the international financial institutions and other international institutions, including INTERPOL, participate as associate members. At the meeting of the Security and Safety Services Network in Nairobi in June 2002, participants agreed to develop tangible outputs, including Security Officer training manuals; career development guidelines; an inter-agency web site; generic recruitment criteria; emergency checklists; physical fitness standards; minimum operating standards for United Nations facilities; and various formats for networking.

23. Overall, there is a rising demand for inter-agency collaboration as more organizations and agencies realize the value of networking. Increasing interest has been expressed in creating similar networking arrangements in the areas of archives and records management and travel services. These possibilities will be considered by the Task Force.

E. Activities of the working group on treasury

24. The working group on treasury (ex-financial services) was discontinued in December 2001. Before its abolishment, the group issued and adopted a United Nations policy on treasury investments and generic financial policy guidelines related to the best practices for the control of cheque issuance and cash management. The group also reviewed an initiative to explore the possibility of establishing a common "back office" operation for the treasury activities, however, the proposal was eventually abandoned as not practical at this time.

F. Outreach and coordination

25. The Task Force on Common Services continues to provide full support to the United Nations Development Group, which is comprised of UNDP,

UNICEF, UNFPA and WFP, in their common services initiatives at the country-office level. As part of its continued assistance, the Common Services Support Unit has assisted the Development Group in developing a training course on common services for country offices for a pilot programme in eight countries. Support was extended to the first country-office common services pilot workshop held in the Philippines in February 2002.

26. In 2001, the Executive Coordinator undertook an official visit to the United Nations Office at Nairobi to follow up on local in-house common services initiatives. The United Nations Office at Nairobi has established an Inter-Agency Administrative Coordination Committee, co-chaired by the Office and UNDP, which is composed of representatives from the funds and programmes and the specialized agencies with offices at the Gigiri complex in Nairobi. Preliminary efforts, under the lead of the United Nations, have focused on the areas of security, procurement services, medical services, information technology and legal services. Similar common services missions to both the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific and the United Nations University in Tokyo were also carried out in 2001 to support joint in-house initiatives.

27. Advisory support from the Common Services Task Force was extended to the United Nations Office at Geneva, which has recently established an Inter-Agency Management User Committee for common services chaired by the United Nations and comprised of the executive heads of Geneva-based United Nations organizations and the specialized agencies. The Management User Committee has set up a Geneva Task Force on Common Services, chaired by the World Health Organization (WHO), to oversee the development and implementation of inter-agency operational activities and technical services.

II. Future activities

28. The Task Force has agreed to extend the present cost-sharing arrangement to support the activities of the Common Services Support Unit in New York until August 2003, and has approved additional funding for the digital archives project and the inter-agency procurement portal. The Task Force is expected to conclude this cost-sharing arrangement by August 2003. The chairs of the working groups will continue to oversee their current project activities and the phasing-down of their group functions. The Task Force will continue to meet on a periodic basis to oversee the progress of the remaining working groups and will also consider additional funding requests on a case-by-case basis for the support of specific working group project activities that have shown tangible progress and demonstrated benefits to the organizations concerned.

29. The Task Force will continue its collaboration with the United Nations Development Group Management Committee in the implementation of common services at the country-office level. Coordination between the Task Force and the Development Group will be further enhanced when phase 2 of the Group's common services roll-out plan is implemented. This phase is expected to focus on the development of common services in countries where the regional commissions and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations are represented alongside the Resident Coordinator system.

30. It is believed that the time has come to review and assess the prudence of the current dual-track approach of the Task Force on Common Services and the United Nations Development Group Management Committee. The Task Force and the UNDG Management Group are composed of the same organizations and members, although their geographical coverage is different. It would be beneficial to consider having one overall coordination group to oversee common services initiatives at both the Headquarters and country-office levels.

31. A consolidated common services programme approach would expedite the harmonization of policies and procedures among the participating organizations. It would ease the development and implementation of standard policies and facilitate innovative project activities. A single overall coordination body would bring forth the vision of having tangible inter-agency coordination and implementation in both the policy and operational levels under one integrated programme approach. A merging of both the Task Force on Common Services and the United Nations Development Group Management Committee would facilitate the next level of United Nations common services.

32. This current report reflects the culmination of the 1997 Secretary-General's track II (strategy six) reform initiative, as outlined in A/51/950. The earlier report of

the Secretary-General (A/55/461) cited the limitations of an informal approach given the lack of specific top-down directives from the various participating organizations. In contrast, the successes attained since 1997 are a result of a positive willingness and cooperative effort on the part of the United Nations organizations to work together and explore new programmes of cooperation. The results achieved far exceed expectations, particularly in consideration of the major constraints outlined in the report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services (A/54/157).

III. Conclusion

33. **The General Assembly is requested to take note of the report of the Secretary-General on the achievements attained in the implementation and completion of the Secretary-General's 1997 track II (strategy six) reform initiative on common services, including a possible future consolidation of common services initiatives that fall under the Task Force on Common Services and the United Nations Development Group Management Committee.**

Annex

Status of the technical working groups of the Task Force on Common Services

Working group	*Chairperson*	*Achievements to date (year)*	*Future targets*
1. Archives and records management	United Nations Secretariat/UNICEF	1. Archives appraisal project (2001) 2. Digital archives project Phase 1 (2001)	*Ongoing* — 1. Digital archives project phases 2-3, 2. United Nations Archives/Research Centre
2. Facilities management	UNDP	1. Aperture link on space management (2000) 2. Energy audits, common policy on disposal of personal computers (2000)	*Discontinued*, replaced by the Inter-Agency Network of Facilities Managers
3. Treasury (ex-Financial Services)	United Nations Secretariat	1. Development of a United Nations treasury investment policy (2001) 2. Inter-agency guidelines on cash management, cheque and foreign exchange transactions (2000)	*Discontinued* due to further lack of interest by the funds and programmes
4. Integrated Management Information Systems (IMIS)	United Nations Secretariat	Governance common services framework and management structure for IMIS together with funds and programmes (2001)	*Completed*, now a common services facility. Functions replaced by IMIS
5. Information technology and telecommunications (ITT)	United Nations Secretariat		*Discontinued*, replaced by the new information communications technology initiative
6. Printing services	United Nations Secretariat		*Discontinued* due to lack of interest by the funds and programmes
7. Personnel services	United Nations Secretariat	Common policy on human resource entitlements pertaining to daily subsistence allowance, Business Class travel and home leave period (2000)	*Ongoing* — 1. Harmonization of Series 300 entitlements and entitlements for hardship duty stations, 2. Work/life issues
8. Procurement services	United Nations Secretariat	1. Revised financial regulations, rules for procurement (1999) 2. Various common procurement contracts and services (1999-2001) 3. Procurement portal development (2001) 4. Common contract freight forwarder (2000)	*Ongoing* — 1. Inter-agency lead procurement arrangements, 2. Portal development (e-market), 3. Professional procurement training, 4. Joint contracts

Working group	*Chairperson*	*Achievements to date (year)*	*Future targets*
9. Travel and transport services	UNICEF	1. New contract for United Nations travel services (2000) 2. Harmonization travel entitlements with working group on travel/transport (2000)	*Ongoing* — 1. Corporate credit card arrangement, 2. Travel card arrangements
10. Legal services	United Nations Secretariat		*Discontinued*, alternative Office of Legal Affairs client/user arrangements in place
11. Safety and security services	United Nations Secretariat	Standard policy on uniforms, use of physical force and firearms (2000)	*Discontinued*, replaced by the United Nations Security and Safety Services Network